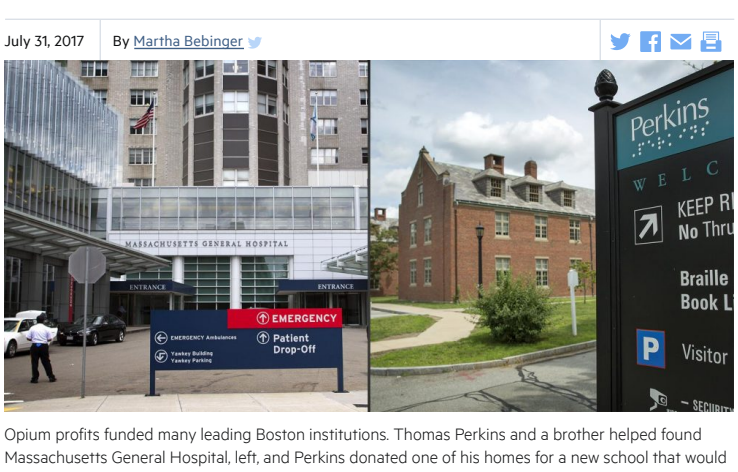
CommonHealth Donate Search

How Profits From Opium Shaped 19th-Century Boston

10:20

July 31, 2017 By Martha Bebinger



Opium profits funded many leading Boston institutions. Thomas Perkins and a brother helped found Massachusetts General Hospital, left, and Perkins donated one of his homes for a new school that would be called Perkins School for the Blind. (Robin Lubbock/WBUR, Hadley Green for WBUR)

This article is more than 2 years old.

Part 1 of a two-part story. Here's part 2.

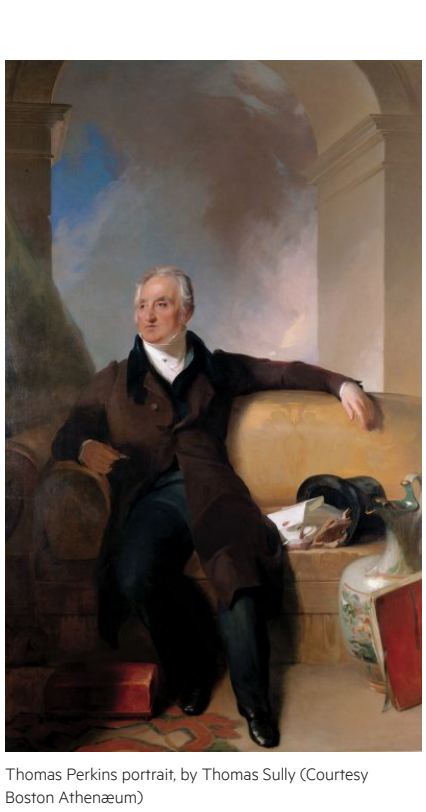
On the second day of 1826, an elegant gentleman with a full head of white hair sits down behind a desk -- perhaps at his stately Boston townhouse, or maybe at his Brookline estate.

Get the week's most important personal health, medical research, and science news sent to your inbox with the CommonHealth newsletter. Sign up now.

Thomas Handasyd Perkins, one of Boston's leading merchants, has been taking risks with shipments to China for nearly 40 years. But now, he may have gone too far.

Perkins drafts a letter to his nephew and business partner in the Chinese port city of Canton, now known as Guangzhou. The message is an apology and a warning: More than 150,000 pounds of Turkish opium is on its way.

"As respects Opium I must take all the blame in going as far as we have," writes Perkins, 65, to 39-year-old John Perkins Cushing. "I thought it best to extend ourselves, to prevent intruders; ... I am mortified that the quantity that will go out in the spring so far surpasses y'r wishes."



Thomas Perkins portrait, by Thomas Sully (Courtesy Boston Athenæum)

But the savvy older businessman and the group of relatives who form Perkins and Co. just might be able to handle his overly enthusiastic opium order. The firm has spent more than a decade building an elaborate smuggling operation to protect what's become its most valuable commodity in China.

Perkins and Co. was among the first -- if not the first -- American companies to establish a permanent trading office in Canton. With employees on the scene year-round, the firm can optimize profits on the drug — which is still legal in the United States, but illegal in China.

Company agents store chests filled with squash-size balls of opium in ships anchored offshore, to have some control over supply and price. They develop relationships with smugglers and corrupt top government officials. And they use boats manned by dozens of rowers to speed past inspectors, sneak up the coast, and deliver opium beyond the official port.

The business plan pays off again and again. On Jan. 11, 1827, one year after the apology, Perkins is back at his desk, writing another letter to his nephew. This time the tone is almost giddy.

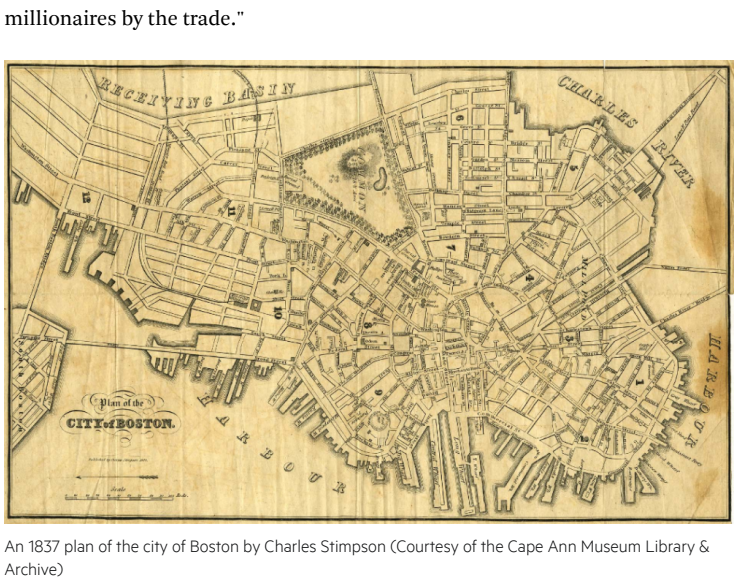
"I have written and thought so much of opium that it gives me an opiate to enter upon the subject," Perkins tells Cushing.

Perkins may have been high on the money coming in. 1826 turned into a good year. Perkins' wealth is reported to have grown to more than $1 million -- the equivalent of about $25 million today.

In the early 1800s, the Brits controlled 90 percent of the Chinese opium trade. But within the 10 percent of business handled by Americans, Perkins and his brother James had the largest share. They owned at least seven ships, and held interest in others. The ships sailed from Massachusetts shores to Turkey, where they bought opium; from Turkey to China, where they sold the drug; and from China to Boston, loaded with tea, porcelain and silk.

Perkins and Co. alone created fortunes for a network of in-laws, nephews and cousins, says John Rogers Haddad, a professor of American Studies at Penn State University.

"That company generated a tremendous amount of revenue and profit," Haddad says. "Multiple people, not just Thomas Perkins himself, were made millionaires by the trade."



An 1837 plan of the city of Boston by Charles Stimpson (Courtesy of the Cape Ann Museum Library & Archive)

Of course, not everyone struck it rich trading in opium. It was a competitive, highly volatile market. But those who worked for Perkins and a few other firms became the city's elite — otherwise known as Boston Brahmins. The Cabots, Cushings, Welds, Delanos (the grandfather of Franklin Delano Roosevelt) and Forbes all built fortunes on opium.

"That money changes the face of Boston and makes it possible for Boston to develop a reputation as one of the world's true civic cities," said Salem State University historian Dane Morrison.

In a city steeped in history, very few residents understand the powerful legacy of opium money.

Hospitals, Railroads, Schools: What Opium Profits Funded

Thomas Perkins invested in mills in Newton, an iron manufacturing plant in Vermont and what some historians say was the country's first railroad. It ran from the Quincy Quarry into Boston. Another Perkins' nephew, John Murray Forbes, invested his opium profits in steamships, mines and railroads that would eventually cross the country.

Haddad is among a handful of historians exploring the connection between America's industrial revolution and the profitable opium trade, dominated by merchants from Boston.

"China had a really strong economy in the early part of the 19th century and the Americans were able to tap into that by exchanging tea for opium," he says. "Opium was really a way that America was able to transfer China's economic power to America's industrial revolution."

Perkins' ships deposited tremendous wealth in Boston too. Chests of tea, bolts of silk, crates of porcelain and cakes of opium -- which was legal in the U.S. -- were hauled off ships onto giant scales outside Boston's Custom House. The goods were tallied and taxed in basements and warehouses around Faneuil Hall and Quincy Market. Tax revenue from the trade funded Massachusetts police and fire departments, roads, bridges, courthouses and schools.

Historian Dane Morrison stands in front of Boston's Custom House, where in the 1800s goods from China that had been hauled off ships were weighed on giant scales. (Jesse Costa/WBUR)

Opium profits funded many leading Boston institutions. The Perkins brothers helped found Massachusetts General Hospital, McLean Hospital and the Boston Athenæum. The names of other opium barons are engraved on university buildings, high schools and public libraries.

Fred Delano Grant, the great-great-grandson of opium trader Warren Delano, says there's a connection between these merchants' industrial age investments and their charitable giving: They were building a knowledge-based economy.

"They knew that knowledge was how you win" in life and in trade, says Grant, a lawyer and scholar of Chinese trade. And these traders, many of whom came from modest families, "knew that you need an educated group of people to bring an economy forward."

Thomas Perkins had a hand in many civic projects as well. He championed construction of the Bunker Hill Monument, was a major contributor to an orphanage, and he donated one of his homes for a new school that would be called Perkins School for the Blind.

'An Unwitting Dependency'

"There was an unwitting dependency in Boston on profits from the opium trade," says Towson University associate history professor Elizabeth Kelly Gray.

But today, that history is largely buried. Most institutions contacted for this story did not know their benefactors got rich selling an illegal drug in China.

Perkins School research librarian Jennifer Arnott did some digging into Thomas Perkins' business history. He behaved like many merchants, she reasons, and followed demand.

"It really was a sort of awareness that you did the trade that was there and that you looked for the opportunities that made sense for your business at that point," Arnott says.

The Boston Athenæum said, in part, in a statement:

> *Our own legacy, like that of many historic institutions, reveals inherent contradictions. We acknowledge that the Perkins brothers built their fortune at the expense of the lives of others ... while supporting a great number of educational, medical, and cultural causes through their generous philanthropy.*
>
> *... We encourage our members, researchers, and visitors to engage critically with our rare materials by asking important and sometimes difficult questions.*

Many Chinese opium traders became pillars of the Boston community. In his eulogy, Perkins is remembered as "one of the noblest specimens of humanity to which our city has ever given birth."

Arnott says the fact that Perkins was trading in opium was probably not a secret in Boston, but the question, "'Is this trade good for the people we're trading with?' is a more recent philosophical concept."

There are signs opinion shifted as Perkins aged, which may help explain why opium is not mentioned even once in a memoir compiled by his son-in-law and published in 1856, two years after Perkins' death.

Debating The Morality Of The Opium Trade

But among merchants, there was a robust debate about the morality of selling opium in China, where at least 2 million residents -- and 10 million by some estimates -- were addicted to the drug by the mid-1800s. New York merchant David Olyphant refused to trade opium, calling it "an evil of the deepest dye." Partners at Perkins and Co. made fun of Olyphant.

"God protect me from all the hallowing influence of holy Joe," wrote Murray Forbes, Perkins' nephew, in a memo. "His ships are all commanded by JC -officered by angels and manned by saints."

"There was an unwitting dependency in Boston on profits from the opium trade."

ELIZABETH KELLY GRAY, TOWSON UNIVERSITY PROFESSOR

Jonathan Goldstein, a research associate at Harvard University's Fairbank Center for Chinese Studies, says Boston merchants defended the trade, "even though they knew it was a debilitating drug that ruined lives." Their thinking, says Goldstein, was that opium was no worse than alcohol and better than other forms of trade, namely: slaves.

Opium was seen as "mild by comparison," Goldstein says.

The Perkins family indeed traded slaves from a base in Haiti in the late 1700s. Business shifted to China and opium in the early 1800s and later some members of the next generation condemned slavery. By the mid-1800s, Murray Forbes had become an active abolitionist. But on the business side, there are strong connections between the slavery and opium trades.

"The kind of expertise they [Perkins and Co.] bring to [opium] in terms of managing goods and finances is something that starts in the slave trade," says Dael Norwood, an assistant professor of history at Binghamton University who studies 19th-century U.S.-China trade.

And money earned selling slaves helped fund the China trade.

"It's the capital that ties it all together," Norwood says.

The Opium Trade's Cultural Legacy

While Boston merchants may not have boasted about what they were selling in China, they did flaunt Chinese goods. Chinese birds and flowers floated across the wallpaper in the drawing room of Perkins' Brookline mansion. Guests entered past tall, ornate ceramic urns and rested on bamboo furniture, covered in silks.

"There's no doubt that if you were involved in the China trade, you held your head high," says Dan Finamore, a curator of maritime art and history at the Peabody Essex Museum. "It was considered alluring in its way, it was mysterious in its way; it was literally the other side of the world."

The museum houses a substantial collection of jewelry, sculpture, paintings and intricately carved wood furniture traders brought back to Boston, Salem, Newburyport and Fairhaven.

All the places sailors stopped along the way to China seeped into the language, foods and culture of Boston in the early 1800s. Professor Morrison, of Salem State, says it would have been common for a Boston mother to send her son on an errand with these instructions:

"'I need you to go to the bazaar. I need a chou of dungaree and ... bohea. And if you go chop, chop, I'll give you a cumchou,' " which Morrison translates as "'Go to the market, get me an assortment of spices, and if you're quick, I'll give you a reward.' "

Opium merchants brought Chinese men and women to Boston to work as cooks, servants and office assistants.

The Boston firms dissolved or stopped doing business with China by the end of the 19th century, but the bonds it created remain. The Keechong Society, a largely social group of families associated with the China trade, formed in the mid-1800s and continued meeting on and off into the early 1970s.

Phyllis Forbes Kerr compiled a book of letters from her great-great-great-grandfather, Robert Bennett Forbes, who was an opium baron. (Jesse Costa/WBUR)

Among the descendants of Boston's opium barons, some never discuss the source of family wealth. Others know the history and tease each other about it.

"The boys in my family, my uncles, were quite wicked to my grandmother," says Phyllis Forbes Kerr, remembering dinners with her grandmother at the Forbes mansion in Milton. It's now a museum. "We would sit at the table and she would say something about Forbes and they would say, 'Oh, you mean the drug dealer,' and she would get really mad."

Kerr collected correspondence from her great-great-great-grandfather, Robert Bennett Forbes, in a book, "Letters from China." Sitting in her Cambridge living room, Kerr opens a map of Boston Harbor, at the height of the China trade. The city is ringed by wharves.

"These are all the ports. You just looked out. There were tons of ships there all the time, I mean it's crazy," Forbes says.

Museums and libraries mount the occasional exhibit about Boston and the China trade but these shows rarely mention opium.

"We've come to a moment where that trade can and should be looked at more closely," says the PEM's Finamore.

Foundations created by the families of opium dealers are funding the work of Binghamton professor Norwood and other historians. Norwood says this signals a willingness to take an honest look at opium as a source of early American wealth. But Norwood says it's hard to say where a reckoning with the legacy of opium profits might lead.

"It's still in the early stages of people recognizing that this was a thing, as is the case with slave reparations," Norwood says. "We do need to recognize and account for what it means to be the beneficiaries of that money and what that changes about our obligations to the rest of the people in society, including people who were harmed by it."

That's primarily the Chinese, but Boston would not escape the scourge of opium in the 1800s.

This segment aired on July 31, 2017.

Related:

- As The Opium Trade Boomed In The 1800s, Boston Doctors Raised Addiction Concerns
- Harvard Puts Its Ties To Slavery On Display
- **Complete Coverage:** Opioid Addiction Crisis

Martha Bebinger Reporter
Martha Bebinger covers health care and other general assignments for WBUR.
More...

© Copyright WBUR 2020